



The Coin of Love and Virtue: Academic Libraries and Value in a Global Pandemic

Maura Seale

University of Michigan

Rafia Mirza

Southern Methodist University

ABSTRACT

In September 2010, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) released The Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report. The spread of the novel coronavirus and the resulting global pandemic have raised questions about the concept of value in academic libraries. How is value attributed? How does value function? What does it mean to demonstrate or prove our value? We begin with an overview and analysis of ACRL's Value of Academic Libraries Initiative. We then provide a description and timeline of the spread of COVID-19 and the reaction of institutions of higher education, academic libraries, professional library organizations, and individual librarians. The pandemic has created a new category of workers—"essential workers"—who provide vital services, perform maintenance work, and labour to keep infrastructures intact. The role of care work and care workers in the pandemic helps illuminate the situation of academic librarians within regimes of neoliberal austerity. Ultimately, we argue that the discourse of library value seeks to prove library value rationally and empirically, often through quantitative data, but capitalism, the economy, and value are fundamentally irrational. Academic library value must be claimed politically; misrecognizing the nature of the problem and relying on common sense understandings of value and the economic, which is what the discourse of library value has done for the past decade, goes nowhere.

Keywords: *academic libraries · capitalism · critical theory · labour · political economy · value*

RÉSUMÉ

En septembre 2010, l'Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) a publié The Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report. La propagation du nouveau coronavirus et la pandémie mondiale qui en résulte ont soulevé des questions sur le concept de valeur dans les bibliothèques universitaires. Comment la valeur est-elle attribuée? Comment fonctionne la valeur? Que signifie démontrer ou prouver notre valeur? Nous

commençons par un aperçu et une analyse de l'initiative Valeur des bibliothèques universitaires de l'ACRL. Nous fournissons ensuite une description et un échéancier de la propagation de la COVID-19 et de la réaction des établissements d'enseignement supérieur, des bibliothèques universitaires, des organisations de bibliothèques professionnelles et des bibliothécaires de façon individuelle. La pandémie a créé une nouvelle catégorie de travailleurs : les « travailleurs essentiels ». Des personnes qui fournissent des services vitaux, effectuent des travaux d'entretien et travaillent pour maintenir les infrastructures intactes. Le rôle du travail de soins et du personnel soignant dans la pandémie contribue à éclairer la situation des bibliothécaires universitaires au sein des régimes d'austérité néolibérale. En fin de compte, nous soutenons que le discours sur la valeur des bibliothèques cherche à prouver la valeur des bibliothèques de manière rationnelle et empirique, souvent au moyen de données quantitatives, mais le capitalisme, l'économie et la valeur sont fondamentalement irrationnels. La valeur des bibliothèques universitaires doit être revendiquée politiquement. Mal reconnaître la nature du problème et s'appuyer sur des conceptions de bon sens concernant la valeur et l'économie, ce que le discours sur la valeur des bibliothèques a fait au cours de la dernière décennie, ne mène nulle part.

Mots-clés : bibliothèques universitaires · capitalisme · économie politique · théorie critique · travail · valeur

IN December 2019, we submitted our proposal for this essay. We proposed an analysis of concepts such as evidence, proof, logic, and data in documents produced by academic library organizations, specifically around the question of library value. We sought to suggest that in their insistence on their own rationality, these organizations fail to understand and are unable to confront the irrational ideological and political challenges posed by neoliberalism and austerity, and also fail to understand and grapple with their own irrationalities (e.g., ideologies, politics, and feelings). The spread of the novel coronavirus and the resulting global pandemic have acted to emphasize our questions about the concept of value in academic libraries. How is value attributed? How does value function? What does it mean to demonstrate or prove our value? How might the global pandemic and the resulting discourse around essential work and workers speak to the state of academic libraries and academic library workers? We are both academic librarians in the United States, and write from the perspective of workers who are able to work remotely while collecting our full salaries for the moment, but we face great uncertainty and know that our institutions will likely turn to pay cuts, furloughs, and layoffs in the coming months. Higher education, public services, and the social safety net have been systematically defunded and dismantled over the past forty years in the US, and the US has never had any form of public healthcare. But neoliberal policies and austerity are not limited to the US; although our examples frequently focus on the US, the same forces are at work in many

other places such as the United Kingdom and Canada. At the same time, we do not seek to gloss the differences across countries, or the complexities of the pandemic.

We begin with an overview and analysis of ACRL's Value of Academic Libraries Initiative, including a close reading of the report that started the initiative. We then provide a description and timeline of the spread of COVID-19 and the reaction of institutions of higher education, academic libraries, professional library organizations, and individual librarians. The pandemic has created a new category of workers—"essential workers"—who provide vital services, perform maintenance work, and labour to keep infrastructures intact. The role of care work and care workers in the pandemic helps illuminate the situation of academic library workers within regimes of neoliberal austerity. The work of academic library workers also often involves care work and maintenance, and when we talk about the work of libraries in this article, we foreground these forms of work despite how other types of library work are often more valued in the workplace itself. We draw on Marx to think through the meaning of value, on Nancy Fraser to understand the role of reproductive labour and care work within neoliberalism, on Karl Polanyi to consider the relationship between the economic and social, and then think through the capitalist logics of efficiency and the future. Ultimately, we argue that although the dominant discourse of library value seeks to prove library value rationally and empirically through the use of quantitative data, in fact capitalism, the economy, and value are fundamentally irrational. That is, they are formed politically and are always ideological. Academic library value must be claimed politically; misrecognizing the nature of the problem and relying on common sense understandings of value and the economic, which is what the dominant discourse of library value has done for the past decade, goes nowhere, as Kotsko (2020) has argued more broadly about higher education.

On Value

In September 2010, the Association for College and Research Libraries released *The Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report*, which sought to position "academic librarians as contributors to campus conversations on accountability and impact" (Oakleaf 2010, 6). The report asserts that "community college, college, and university librarians no longer can rely on their stakeholders' belief in their importance. Rather, they must demonstrate their value" (11) and argues that critical perspectives on accountability are "impractical, given the realities we face today in our institutions" (7). In contrast, the *Value* report "takes a pragmatic approach" and does not "take sides in such debates" (7).

The overarching goal of the report is “to help academic librarians participate in the conversation and to identify resources to support them in demonstrating the value of academic libraries in clear, measurable ways” (8). This work is particularly important now as

government officials see higher education as a national resource. Employers view higher education institutions as producers of a commodity—student learning. Top academic faculty expect higher education institutions to support and promote cutting edge research. Parents and students expect higher education to enhance students’ collegiate experience, as well as propel their career placement and earning potential. (11)

Within this context, academic libraries “must demonstrate their value” (11).

What is value? The report identifies use (which in and of itself is not compelling), return-on-investment (ROI) or financial value (“value for money” or benefits divided by costs), commodity production (quantity times price), impact, and competing alternatives. The report recommends that academic libraries focus primarily on financial and impact value, as these forms of value are especially of interest to specific stakeholders. Although the report does speak to impact value, it repeatedly returns to financial value, possibly because it is vastly easier to quantitatively assess and produce data about. The report recognizes that academic library (and higher education) value is not comparable to the production of widgets at the cheapest cost, and identifies the related ideas of “value as results” and “value on investment” as non-financial approaches to library value that instead emphasize the impact of library service and how libraries help library users (23–24).

The solution to academic libraries’ problems, the report emphasizes, lies in the collection of data—from institutional assessment management systems, from assessment activities at both the library and institutional level, and especially from individual students—which can then be used as evidence of value. The quantitative assessment of value must be ongoing, seemingly in perpetuity: “the process is not one of proving value, but rather continuously increasing value” (140). The report ends on an observation that contradicts much of what the report has argued:

Indeed, the demonstration of value is not about looking valuable; it’s about being valuable. By seeking their best value, librarians do their jobs even better, and that’s a goal worth pursuing all the time. By learning from higher education colleagues and expanding their efforts to not only show value but be valuable, librarians can do just that—move from a future of a surviving academic library, to a thriving one. (140)

The report’s focus on financial value in regard to institutions that do not generate profit is connected to its desire to satisfy the desires of “financially minded” stakeholders who think in terms of financial value and profit, stakeholders for whom “higher education is in many ways a business and money is the bottom line” (95). In

comparison, the report spends much less time on stakeholders who “focus on the contribution higher education makes through producing learning, research, and service” (95). These stakeholders would likely be more interested in “value as results” and “value on investment” but the report largely ignores these ideas after introducing them. The report is foremost about showing value to financially minded stakeholders rather than being valuable to library users, and these cannot be reduced to each other.

The work begun by the report has continued into the present, as the *Value* report laid the groundwork for the diffusion of what we call the “dominant discourse of library value” throughout the profession. The value of academic libraries became a goal within ACRL’s strategic plan in 2011, supported by the work of a standing committee (Becker and Goek 2020). In 2012, ACRL received a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to develop the program “Assessment in Action: Academic Libraries and Student Success” under the umbrella of the Value of Academic Libraries (VAL) Initiative, in which librarians carried out assessment projects at their home institutions over the course of three years (ACRL n.d.). After the program concluded in 2015, ACRL turned its curriculum into a “roadshow” that academic libraries could pay to host for their staff (ACRL n.d.). In 2017, ACRL published *Academic Library Impact: Improving Practice and Essential Areas to Research*, which heavily emphasizes the use of learning analytics to demonstrate value (Connaway, Harvey, Kitzie, and Mikitish, 2017; Becker and Goek 2020; Nicholson, Pagowsky, and Seale 2019). ACRL next decided to fund grants to research projects based on *Academic Library Impact* beginning in 2018 (Becker and Goek 2020). In 2020, a special issue of *College & Research Libraries (C&RL)* highlighting work based on *Academic Library Impact* was published. As Jones, Briney, Goben, Salo, Asher, and Perry (2020) note in their article in this issue, “hundreds of scholarly artifacts have been published and disseminated as a result of the VAL initiative” (573–74). The publication of *The Value of Academic Libraries* report instantiated a regime of assessment and a fixation on data and analytics within academic libraries, which was reaffirmed by similar trends in broader society. Academic libraries have sought to prove their value by creating assessment-focused positions, collecting and analyzing data on library users, using analytics and student data to connect library use to student success, working to connect grant money to library resources, and attempting to generate ROI for library use through bibliometric analysis of faculty research. Academic libraries have unceasingly over the past decade looked for empirical proof, objective data, and quantifiable evidence to logically and rationally prove their value. They have even turned to hierarchies, incentive structures, and institutions they have relatively little control over, such as scholarly publishing, in order to quantify and prove their

value. This sort of work constitutes a significant proportion of library assessment scholarship.

The guest editors' introduction to the *C&RL* special issue concludes with these thoughts and questions:

Higher education institutions are calling on all units to demonstrate value as enrollments decline, costs rise, and budgets decrease or remain stagnant. This makes assessment unavoidable, and connecting the library to retention and success is the way most leadership interpret value and want to see it demonstrated . . . Where does this leave us? If we have no choice but to prove value through this monetary lens, can we find a way to improve within that directive? Can we push to broaden the definition of value and see it in a more holistic sense? And what if we cannot prove what we were asked to prove? Can we turn negative findings into opportunities for improvement? Can we look at what we are doing, determine whether it “works” or not, and make a determination to do more of it, stop doing work as we may have done it for a long time, or make changes and try again? (Becker and Goek 2020, 328)

This essay was published at what turned out to be the tail end of the longest economic expansion in history (obviously there are caveats; most economic growth went to already wealthy companies and individuals). But this is essentially the same wording and reasoning deployed in the first *Value of Academic Libraries* report, which was published during a global recession. Let us reflect on the IMLS grant to ACRL, the Assessment in Action program, the Academic Library Impact grants, the “hundreds of scholarly artifacts” that have emerged from the Value of Academic Libraries Initiative over the past decade—that is, let us think about the myriad, repeated, and endless ways in which academic libraries have proven their value—and consider how we were all still being called on to “demonstrate value as enrollments decline, costs rise, and budgets decrease or remain stagnant” during the economic expansion that immediately preceded the global pandemic (Becker and Goek 2020, 328).

The assumptions made by the dominant discourse of library value are framed as neutral, pragmatic, and objective: just the way things are at our institutions in the US and those across the world that are subject to neoliberal policies and austerity. These assumptions are given power by how well they align with ideological assumptions in higher education more broadly (Kotsko 2020). The VAL Initiative and its successors understand themselves, and the world, as, above all, *rational*. In posing itself as the only rational response to reality and dismissing critical perspectives and questioning as “impractical,” the discourse of library value (and indeed, the field of library “science”) seeks affirmation through an affiliation with reason, empiricism, positivism, and objectivity, aspects of liberalism that are appealing and seem natural and common sense within Western culture. The ideas are also heavily associated with masculinity and whiteness, and as such are perceived to be of importance (Goldberg

1993; Said 1979). Proving quantifiable economic value through quantified data is, as we have argued elsewhere (Mirza and Seale 2017), also about trying to associate the gendered care work of libraries and librarians with more prestigious forms of work. The dominant discourse of library value also reproduces and seeks to naturalize neoliberal ideology through its understanding of library value primarily in economic terms, through its insistence that library work can be quantified, and through its demand for quantifiable data, as Nicholson (2016), Seale (2013), Beilin (2016), Cope (2014), and other LIS scholars of libraries and neoliberalism have argued. The embrace of neoliberalism, like the VAL Initiative's insistence on its own rationality and its association with racialized and gendered forms of prestige, is an ideological project. The VAL initiative, however, understands itself as outside of ideology, neutral, and objective. As Blanke (1989) has described, libraries and library workers have claimed political neutrality since the late nineteenth century in exchange for professional status, which allows them to "drift into an uncritical accommodation with society's dominant political and economic powers" (39). Similarly, the VAL initiative is just presenting the facts and not taking sides. This denial exposes the initiative's inherent contradictions, which we may define as *irrational*.

The discourse of library value relies on a sense of economic rationality. Value can be empirically proven through (not always but frequently) quantitative data. Once value is proven, valuable things and valuable people will be perceived as valuable by rational economic actors and funded or otherwise supported as though they are valuable. If academic libraries specifically and higher education more broadly continue to be subject to stagnant or shrinking budgets, our assessments must have failed to adequately demonstrate our value. It cannot be that the metrics are wrong, inadequate or *irrational*; the fault must lie in libraries' and library workers' inability to frame themselves in alignment with a system that is inherently antithetical to our work. Becker and Goek (2020) essentially introduce the *C&RL* special issue on assessing library value by asking where we have gone wrong in our rational pursuit of empirically and objectively demonstrating library value. This is essentially the bootstrap or meritocracy narrative applied to the funding of academic libraries; if academic libraries are not adequately supported, it is because we have failed to prove our value because the rational, meritocratic system assumed by the discourse of library value rewards the worthy, those academic libraries who successfully prove their value.

COVID-19

The special issue of *C&RL*, meant to celebrate a decade of the VAL initiative, was instead published during the early stages of a global pandemic. The novel coronavirus emerged in China in December 2019, reaching the US around January 2020 according

to our current knowledge (Baker 2020). In contrast to the rationality of the VAL initiative, Adam Elkus (2020) describes the novel coronavirus as inherently *irrational*: “It exists, and the only thing it wants is targets. It does not think, it does not feel, and it lies totally outside the elaborate social nuances humans have carved out through patterns of communication, representation, and discourse.” The world’s reaction to the spread of the novel coronavirus, particularly in the US, but in other countries as well, especially the UK and Canada, lays bare the problems with rational economic conceptions of value.

By early March 2020, higher education institutions¹ had begun canceling in-person courses and moving courses online; they also began to suggest and, in some cases, mandate that students move out of dormitories, often back home, although in many cases students were allowed to petition to remain in on-campus housing. The libraries affiliated with these institutions, however, had a more varied experience. Some moved to solely online services and resources early on, such as MIT (Bourg 2020). Other institutions moved more slowly or resisted closing physical buildings even as courses moved online (Hinchliffe and Wolff-Eisenberg 2020; DLF Labour Working Group 2020; Murgu 2020). Public libraries, too, varied in their responses. On Twitter, several library workers began to build a movement to publicly pressure libraries to close physical buildings and protect their staff and communities. This campaign originally appeared under #closethelibraries (Libraryworkers.net 2020a, 2020b; @OrganizingLIS n.d.), although the current campaign, which is also now focusing on library furloughs and layoffs, is #protectlibraryworkers (Solon 2020; 2020b), both led by librarian Callan Bignoli.²

On March 13, 2020, the American Library Association (ALA) released a statement:

We know that in times of crisis, libraries of all kinds play invaluable roles in supporting their communities both in person and virtually. We are stewards of accurate information. We connect library users with local public health resources and services. Libraries can be key partners in empowering members of our community to fight the spread of the coronavirus. (ALA 2020a)

The statement ignored public health recommendations around social distancing and uncertainties at the time about how the virus was spread, including whether and how long it could live on physical objects such as books and computer keyboards, merely saying: “If libraries stay open, they should follow CDC recommendations

1. Primarily in the US, UK, and Canada—many institutions in continental Europe and China had already closed. It is also important to note that several southeast Asian countries (South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Vietnam) had already taken action by this point, and some places avoided lockdowns entirely early on, like Hong Kong.

2. As with any social media campaign, many other library workers on Twitter were involved in promoting the campaign and it is difficult to attribute authorship.

for environmental cleaning and disinfection. They should also encourage their staff and users to take basic steps to avoid spreading germs” (ALA 2020a). This statement is invested in vocational awe, a term coined by Fobazi Ettarh (2018) to describe the mythos of libraries as sacred spaces and library workers as acolytes, in which “librarianship is seen as a calling rather than a profession.” Within the logic of vocational awe, libraries are inherently good, and any failures are the result of individual workers failing their vocation rather than connected to structural flaws within the institution itself. Workers should thus sacrifice themselves for the greater good of institutional survival.

The ALA statement relies on the idea that librarianship is a vocation and expects library workers to potentially sacrifice their health and lives without question or complaint (and without sufficient training and personal protective equipment). Vocational awe is connected to what John Warner (2020) has referred to as “institutional awe,” in which “the administrators in charge see the institution itself as needing protection and perpetuation at all costs.” The institution becomes more valuable than the people who work or study there. The ALA statement is in stark contrast to language from a New Orleans library union activist, which centres workers, community members, and concern for public health:

Libraries are one of the last social services to normally be open to all. Our labor affects the community health in many ways. But New Orleans library workers understood that our workplaces’ social role also made libraries a potentially massive infection site for the at-risk populations we overwhelmingly serve . . . But the communities served by our library system are incredibly vulnerable. . . Any decision to keep the libraries open would constitute a threat to community health. (Wolfe 2020)

In contrast to the ALA statement, this library worker understands librarianship as a profession, with specific expertise that does not necessarily lend itself well to public health work or childcare, and sees the institution as accountable to both its workers and the community it serves. Within vocational awe, obligation is not reciprocal; workers must sacrifice themselves for the profession. But understanding library work as a profession, not a vocation, as labour, not as religious calling, acknowledges that this reciprocity must flow to the workers as well as the institution and that institutions are sites of historical and ongoing structural oppression and inequality.

After pushback,³ the ALA Executive Board changed course, recommending libraries close:

To protect library workers and their communities from exposure to COVID-19 in these unprecedented times, we strongly recommend that academic, public and school library

3. Pointing this out was a common response on Twitter. For example “I would love it if ALA was holding a session called “Advocacy for Library Workers During a Crisis,” rather than what they did have which was “Advocacy for Your Library During a Crisis” (Seeber 2020).

leaders and their trustees and governing bodies evaluate closing libraries to the public and only reopening when guidance from public health officials indicates the risk from COVID-19 has significantly subsided. (ALA 2020b)

That ALA had to issue an amended statement suggests that at least in this case, vocational awe failed the organization when confronted by the very material conditions of sickness and death (Petersen 2020b). There is also, of course, a good amount of vocational awe in this statement as well, but at least it accedes to public health guidelines:

The health of our library workers and the communities we serve is of utmost and equal importance. Libraries are by design unable to practice social distancing to the degree recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other health authorities. Keeping libraries open at this time has the potential to harm communities more than help. We underscore the importance and need to come together in this crisis and commit to ensuring our libraries, which provide so many important services to our communities, do not serve as vectors for a fast-moving pandemic. (ALA 2020b)

As Callan Bignoli (2020) describes, these stories of “unmitigated success and unqualified resilience” have continued throughout the pandemic, even as locations move into reopening.

While the library community was debating the importance of libraries as communal places that lend and share physical objects, municipalities of various sizes began issuing shutdown and stay-at-home orders. Most business, retail, and services were deemed “non-essential” and closed or restricted in many areas. It is not surprising that during a global pandemic, healthcare workers would be considered essential, but the category of essential soon expanded beyond this to include: grocery store employees, truck drivers, drugstore workers, liquor store employees, gas station attendants, custodial and janitorial staff, sanitation workers, postal and package delivery workers, warehouse staff, gig economy delivery workers, public transit workers, food service workers, and those who provide childcare for essential workers (Kinder 2020; Waterfield 2020; Selyukh and Bond 2020). As is obvious from this list, essential workers primarily perform work that is oriented towards providing services, maintenance work, and supporting infrastructure. Essential workers tend to be in lower paid fields such as food service, retail, and gig work; doctors and nurses do have higher pay, but other healthcare workers such as licensed practical nurses, orderlies, food service and administrative staff, and custodians also tend to have lower pay (Tomer and Kane 2020). While some workers received temporary raises or bonuses, these workers have historically been undervalued and underpaid for the vital work they perform, and are now being asked to regularly risk infection, sickness, and death for \$13/hour due to the widespread lack of air filtration, personal protective equipment, and testing. Some workers have begun to organize and demand

better pay and working conditions, but many have already died (Gurley 2020; Harriot 2020; Scott 2020).

As we write this, nearly 260,000 people have died in the United States (Johns Hopkins University and Medicine, 2020). They have disproportionately been Black, Latinx, and Native American due to pervasive and longstanding racial inequalities and disparities in health and access to health care (Kendi 2020; Cineas 2020; Shah 2020; Hawkins 2020; Rios and Rangarajan 2020). We both cycle through feelings of sadness and anger: this did not have to happen this way. Although we may be facing furloughs, pay cuts, and layoffs, we are both able to work from comfortable homes of adequate size for the moment. We are able to socially distance. Our libraries moved to remote work fairly early on, and as librarians rather than staff, we were immediately able to take advantage and ensure our own safety. Our original proposal, submitted in December 2019, feels like an artifact from a different time in many ways. But the core question—what is value?—feels even more important as we see undervalued and underpaid service and maintenance workers suddenly becoming “essential” but remaining underpaid and under-protected. Academic librarianship, as we have seen in our privilege to work from home, can and does turn to weak but still present notions of professionalism and prestige, which seek to devalue and hide the centrality of care work to the profession (Mirza and Seale 2017; Seale and Mirza 2019a). We think of care work in the broadest possible terms, following Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007), who considers the connection between crisis and social reproduction. Reproduction, she argues, “signifies the broad array of political, economic, cultural, and biological capacities a society uses to renew itself daily, seasonally, generationally” (53). Care work is any work that supports social reproduction, and crises occur when “the social formation can no longer be reproduced on the basis of the pre-existing system of social relations” (Hall and Schwarz 1985, 9). Care work and social reproduction are necessary to the creation and maintenance of human society. Vocational awe devalues care work and social reproduction by offering only rhetoric as pay for this work, but this labour is nonetheless essential for maintaining human society.

The global pandemic instead helps us recognize certain solidarities and alignments between the care work of libraries and the care work of these other, more seriously undervalued professions. How might library workers push back against weaponized awe, against the “expectation of gratitude...performed most violently as the demand for sacrifice,” in Sara Ahmed’s (2020) framing? How might we tear down the vocational awe that pervades understandings of care work and social reproduction, and instead begin to materially value these forms of library work? How might our institutions be rethought around notions of reciprocity and community accountability rather than survival of the institution at all costs? In contrast to the

self-proclaimed pragmatic and apolitical approach of library value discourse, we think it is absolutely necessary to unpack how we understand and deploy the concept of value.⁴ In a rational economic system that assigns value rationally, based on empirical evidence of value, essential workers would be valued more than ever at this moment, when their importance to our health and lives has been so clearly thrown into relief. Instead, they risk death for less than a living wage, and it is imperative we ask why. Understanding why and how essential work during a global pandemic is devalued can help us understand our own position as care workers labouring within regimes of neoliberal austerity.

Library Value and/as Neoliberalism

The dominant discourse of library value, as exemplified in the VAL initiative and its successor projects, understands itself as rooted in evidence, logic, and above all, rationality. The VAL Initiative specifically, and academic librarianship more broadly, as some LIS scholars have argued, uncritically deploys neoliberal ideology in its efforts to portray itself as relevant and prestigious (Seale 2013; Nicholson 2016). We have argued elsewhere that neoliberalism and prestige are bound up with white masculinity (Mirza and Seale 2017). Through its association with reason and rationality, through its status as common sense, through its emphasis on economic value and quantification, neoliberalism also claims to be empirical, a clear-eyed view of the world and how it operates; its policies are correspondingly evidence-based and logical. Economics scholars, however, have increasingly argued that how we understand economics is ideological. For example, recent scholarship has reconsidered the Laffer curve, supply-side economics, and monetary theory, while organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank have rethought structural adjustment policies that forced countries into austerity (IMF 2014; Dabla-Norris et al. 2015; Pizzigati 2020; Matthews 2020). Neoliberalism and related policies like austerity are fundamentally ideological and political, and empiricism, evidence, and proof cannot contradict ideology (Brown 2015; Harvey 2005). It is *irrational*.

The dominant discourse of library value assumes that others—funders, stakeholders, university administrators—are rational economic actors who make decisions based on evidence, on numbers, on empirical understandings of economic value, but this approach fundamentally misunderstands how neoliberalism functions as ideology, an ideology that is eventually made material through funding decisions. Austerity and accountability cannot be rationally reasoned with. And we feel this is borne out by the fact that we have spent more than a decade proving our value

4. We might even suggest that it is vital that academic library workers read and understand political economy. See, for example, Birdsall (2000) and Ellenwood (2020).

and have experienced more than a decade of flat or shrinking budgets at many academic libraries.⁵ We turn to theorists of political economy to analyze the objective, empirical, and rational understandings of value that undergird the dominant discourse of library value.

The dominant discourse of library value is always willing to engage with contemporary capitalism on its own terms. In *Capital*, Marx takes on the question of value. Although value as Marx understands it existed prior to capitalism, capitalism's specific understanding of valuation emerges from appropriating surplus labour in order to generate surplus value. This surplus value is profit and is reinvested as capital. In a capitalist society, thinking in terms of value necessarily involves expropriation, which is masked by the universal equivalence of the commodity form. Within capitalism, everything, including, and especially labour, is exchangeable for everything else at some price; this is the flattening of (qualitative) difference into quantification. Use-value is how buyers relate to commodities, while exchange-value is how sellers relate to commodities. To Marx ([1867] 1977), value is not inherent: "it does not have its description branded on its forehead" (167). It is relational and produced socially, but appears as natural:

It is however precisely this finished form of the world of commodities—the money form—which conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly. (168–69)

Labour is the source of all value, but that labour is undervalued by capital in order to produce profit. Commodities hide the labour that produces them, and that their value is not inherent but produced by social relations: "the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves" (164–65). This fetishization or reification of commodities makes it appear that commodities, capitalism, and the economy are natural, and function on their own (168). The dominant discourse of library value seeks to justify the existence of libraries through their financial value, which in this context we can understand as Marx's exchange-value, as capitalism is a system that reduces everything to exchange-value, although that exchange-value has to be undergirded by use-value. But libraries do not produce profit—they do not generally charge their student and faculty "customers"—and indeed, often cost their home institutions. Both print and electronic collections have associated costs, both in terms of purchasing and maintenance, as do the physical and electronic infrastructures that academic libraries rely on. Arguably, the "value" of academic libraries is incommensurable with the value form within capitalism.

5. See Kotsko (2020) for an analysis of how this functions within higher education, specifically in regards to the humanities.

Academic libraries do have use-value, however, as documented in the hundreds of efforts to prove library value. Roxanne Shirazi has also argued that academic libraries primarily engage in (feminized) emotion work, service work, and reproductive labour, and that this constitutes their use-value:

We perform labour that reproduces the academy, from teaching information literacy, research skills and citation formats to students, to selecting, cataloging, and preserving materials for current and future use. This work is vital and it is intellectual labour, but because it does not conform to the publish or perish model at the top of the academic hierarchy, it is reduced to (and devalued as) 'service.' (Shirazi 2014)

This is echoed in recent work by Nancy Fraser, who has argued that in order to understand capital, we must focus not just on “the front-story of exploitation” but also the preconditions or “the back-story of expropriation” that has allowed capital to expand (2014, 60). She argues that capital expands “via the non-compensation of a portion of workers’ labour-time” (2014, 61). This non-compensated labour is often reproductive labour. Recently, Fraser has argued that we are experiencing a crisis of care (Fraser 2016; see also Chang 2020). Socially reproductive labour includes not just childrearing and housework but also caring for others and otherwise developing and maintaining social bonds, as well as the work of public health, education, and other public services, as care has never been confined to the family:

the capitalist economy relies on—one might say, free rides on—activities of provisioning, care-giving and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds, although it accords them no monetized value and treats them as if they were free. Various called ‘care,’ ‘affective labour’ or ‘subjectivation,’ such activity forms capitalism’s human subjects, sustaining them as embodied natural beings, while also constituting them as social beings, forming their habitus and the cultural ethos in which they move.” (Fraser 2016, 101; see also Chang 2020; Sloniowski 2016)

Under capitalism, this labour is never paid for with money. Instead, this work is paid for with “the coin of ‘love’ and ‘virtue’” (Fraser 2016, 102), or rather, with vocational awe (Ettarh 2018). Fraser argues

that every form of capitalist society harbours a deep-seated social-reproductive ‘crisis tendency’ or contradiction: on the one hand, social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other, capitalism’s orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies. (2016, 100)

This has intensified under neoliberal or financialized capitalism (Fraser uses both terms interchangeably), as “it has massively recruited women into the paid workforce—not just young unmarried women, but everybody. And at the same time, the whole financial sector puts enormous pressure on governments to cut social spending to institute what they euphemistically call austerity” (Chang 2020).

This work is usually gendered, outside of the market, and frequently invisible; what the spread of the novel coronavirus has revealed is “the unpaid bill for social reproduction” (Chang 2020). This labour has become visible, as have the ways in which social reproduction labour has been underinvested in over the past 40 years:

It's not just that care has become visible, which it has. But I think we're starting to see how production and reproduction are so intertwined that you can't care without this material infrastructure. And to the degree that that is organized on the basis of a for-profit production system, there are all kinds of gross *irrationalities* [emphasis added] that cause a breakdown in the supply chain in the need for care. (Chang 2020)

During the pandemic, the underinvestment in reproductive labour has become even more apparent as schools and daycares closed, and workers were forced to school and care for children at home, while simultaneously working from home. Reopening has reinforced this, as parents are forced to return to workplaces despite schools and daycares remaining closed (Featherstone 2020).

Academic libraries, like other feminized public services and care work, perform the essential labour of social reproduction; it is essential to the continued functioning of capitalism but is denied any exchange value and makes no profit. Care labour provides the conditions for wage labour, but the fact that it is essential is erased and both the labour and the workers who provide it are rendered invisible because if they were visible as workers, capitalism would no longer be able to sustain itself. This devaluation of reproductive labour is not natural. And as Fraser (2016) notes, this applies not just to the labour and workers, but also to the material infrastructures that make care work possible at all (Chang 2020). Capital seeks to extract all profit possible from the sites of social reproduction: “Destroying its own conditions of possibility, capital's accumulation dynamic effectively eats its own tail” (Fraser 2016, 103). Academic libraries and library workers sometimes respond to this erasure by assuming more and more tasks related to use-value—we host food pantries and fund study breaks for students during finals⁶—or pay ourselves with “the coin of ‘love’ and ‘virtue’” by investing in and reproducing vocational awe and resilience (Fraser 2016; Ettarh 2018; Berg, Galvan, and Tewell 2018). Academic libraries and library workers also respond by chasing prestige through an overinvestment in its markers—focusing on innovation, using the language of professionalism, increased degree requirements, strong demarcations between librarians and “staff,” wage hierarchies, resisting identifying as workers—and emphasizing liberal individualism as the solution to systemic inequities (Seale and Mirza 2019a; Mirza and Seale 2017). These moves reinforce hierarchies of race, gender, and class, and merely shift exploitation onto those lower in these hierarchies, similarly to Fraser's (2016) argument that reproductive labor is offloaded on low-paid, often immigrant, domestic workers. Neither strategy speaks to exchange-value; neither strategy turns

6. These are not bad things! But we do try to do too much.

academic libraries into sites that make profit or create debt that can then be used to extract value. Academic libraries are not legible within capitalism, and indeed the very notion of a public good or public service is *irrational* within the logic of capitalism. Rather than embracing the notion of a public good that engages in care work and the labour of social reproduction, and that is antithetical to capitalist logics, we ourselves minimize our infrastructural, service, and maintenance work, and look to others—faculty, consultants, professional library organizations—to tell us how to demonstrate value within a system that will never value us. As Lisa Sloniowski (2016) has noted, “We recognize movers, shakers, pushers, shovers, leaders, and change agents, but how do we acknowledge emotional labour and care work?” (663).

We Live in a Society

If we think about the economy as socially constructed and always already ideological, we can distinguish between use-value, or the value something has for those who use it, and exchange-value, or the value of something within capitalism (or financial value in the terms of library value discourse). The use-value of academic libraries and higher education lies in the socially reproductive labour and care work workers in both perform, which make capitalism possible, but which are illegible to capitalism. This labour also makes human society possible. Inspired by the New Deal, and writing in the early years of World War II, Karl Polanyi sought to historicize market liberalism and one of its core elements, the self-regulating market. According to Polanyi ([1944] 2001),

A market economy is an economic system controlled, regulated, and directed by market prices; order in the production and distribution of goods is entrusted to this self-regulating mechanism. An economy of this kind derives from the expectation that human beings behave in such a way as to achieve maximum money gains. (71)

Importantly, the market economy and the self-regulating market are created and historical, although much of its ideological power emerges from its claims to be natural as well as from its claims to be the end of human progress.

Polanyi argues that the economy is not autonomous, as is often assumed by classical economic theory, but embedded in social relations. The utopian project of the self-regulating market, in contrast, requires subordinating society to the logic of the market. The concept of the self-regulating market requires turning everything, including humans and nature, into commodities, and imposing the logic of the market and its corresponding risks onto people through the state or other forms of repression:

the control of the economic system by the market is of overwhelming consequence to the whole organization of society: it means no less than the running of society as an adjunct

to the market. Instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system . . . society must be shaped in such a manner as to allow that system to function according to its own laws. (60)

The imposition of market liberalism leads to protective countermovements that resist the disembedding of the economy from society—Polanyi’s “double movement” (79). The utopian project of the self-regulating market can never be achieved because it is not natural, and because of these countermovements. As Polanyi explains, “laissez-faire was planned”; to which he adds, “the introduction of free markets, far from doing away with the need for control, regulation, and intervention, enormously increased their range” (147). Despite this, market liberalism and the self-regulating market live on, because their failures can always be explained away as “the incomplete application of [their] principles” (149).

As we write this, there are ongoing debates about whether or not we should continue to stay home (to save our lives and the lives of others by limiting the spread of the novel coronavirus) or “open up” (to save the economy). This binary exemplifies Polanyi’s observation that market liberalism and the idea of the self-regulating market require society be an adjunct to the market; we must open the economy because it is unthinkable to demand that the economy accede to social needs. Andrew Liu (2020) too has noted this seeming tension between human society and the capitalist economy: “The novel coronavirus initially emerged and spread across the world through market activities, and our ability to tame it now will be decided by the degree to which we can subordinate market logics to our own survival, rather than vice versa.” Despite classical economics’ claims about the autonomy of the economy and its ability to self-regulate, the novel coronavirus has revealed that we *are* the economy (Kirshner 2020); there is no economy external to human society, and human society requires the labour of social reproduction. There is no *homo oeconomicus* or liberal subject that lives and acts outside of the social: “Isn’t the economy us that’s sitting at home, and us that have no choice but to go to work?” (Miles quoted in Kirshner 2020). Fraser echoes this in her description of neoliberalism as an ideology that naturalizes and elides power structures and places social conditions outside of history, presenting them as unchangeable, inevitable, and natural. Ideological power allows those who have structural power to remain innocent of their power and privilege, and of the consequences of their choices (Fraser 2014).

The discourse of re-opening reveals just how embedded the economic is in the social; most supporters of reopening are white, while most essential workers are Black or people of colour (Hoskin 2020). This is not just a debate about the economy, but about casting social inequalities as inevitable and allowing white people to remain innocent. Neoliberal subjects are just individual consumers free to make individual choices, which is echoed by supporters of re-opening: “emancipation has

been redefined in market terms” (Fraser 2016, 113). As we have argued elsewhere, thinking about human society in terms of the market is fundamentally racialized (Seale and Mirza 2019b). Sites of social reproduction are doubly marginalized, then: care labour is not “real” labour and does not need to be remunerated, and labour that benefits the public writ large might benefit “those people.” White beneficiaries of these systems have subsequently abandoned them to privatization, and higher education and academic libraries have not escaped unharmed. Higher education has become a matter of individual benefit. The economic devaluation of academic libraries is embedded in this history and these social formations and cannot be countered by rationally demonstrating some version of financial or impact value. Whiteness may confer economic privilege, but racism is also about *feelings*, which we might also understand as *irrational* (Hochschild 2016; Roediger 1999).

The contradictions of capitalism described by Fraser become very apparent in the current situation. The labour of social reproduction must continue, but capital cannot profit if this labour is paid, and so must exploit those that do it and expropriate their labour. Those that perform this labour occupy the periphery of society and their lives are not seen as having inherent value: “where money is a primary medium of power, the fact of its being unpaid (or underpaid) seals the matter: those who do this work are structurally subordinate to those who earn cash wages” (Fraser 2014, 62). Neoliberalism demands care labour without pay; it seeks libraries without library workers and schools without teachers. As is made evident by this pandemic, essential workers are care workers, but because they do not already receive fair wages, their labour is essential but they themselves are not. Capitalism has sought to manage this contradiction by drawing strict boundaries (by race, gender, sexuality, nationality, class, and ability) between those who are valued (because they have capital) and those it consumes as capital (Hayes 2017; Story 2019). Those individuals who perform the labour of profit extraction and expropriation, in contrast, are valued. Care workers are framed as naturally inclined to their work; this renders care work as unskilled and appropriately uncompensated. And so, all care work is equivalent, as seen in how library staff are forced to do non-library work: cleaning, working at food banks and homeless shelters, scrubbing off graffiti (Ford 2020). The value of the lives of these workers is only in their use by capital. As Fraser (2014) suggests, “These are features not of a capitalist economy, but of a capitalist *society* [emphasis in the original]” (66). The economic does not exist outside of society, and the ways in which it is structured, including its inequities, are shaped by existing power hierarchies and inequalities in broader society. The economic realm is not organized rationally but is instead pervaded by *feelings* about who is valuable (Ossei-Owusu 2020). The dominant discourse of library value necessarily has to value different workers differently, as academic libraries too exist within social inequities.

We Should Improve Society Somewhat: Capitalism and Finance

Common sense understandings of both “value” and “the economy” that underlie the dominant discourse of library value pretend that both are empirical, natural, and transparent, and situate that discourse within capitalist logics. But capitalism is not rational, either. Marx ([1867] 1977) repeatedly turns to the language of mysticism and religion to describe the commodity:

the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations rising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, there, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (165)

The commodity is “mysterious” (164), “enigmatic” (164) “mystical” (164) a “mystery” (169) and “magic and necromancy” (169). To Marx, the system of capitalism which is always in process, is fundamentally *irrational*, in contrast to the classical economists he critiques, who think of the economic as natural and rational: “So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value in either a pearl or diamond” (177). Similarly, Polanyi repeatedly uses the language of irrationality to counter market liberalism's claims to rationality as well: its proponents demonstrate “a veritable faith in man's secular salvation through a self-regulating market,” “evangelical fervor,” and “fanaticism” (141). Marx and Polanyi work to historicize capitalism, which further reveals its irrationality; capital is only rational when it is timeless or the rational endpoint of a telos.

The novel coronavirus has revealed how fundamentally *irrational* and ludicrous capitalism is. Supply chains for medical supplies and food are threatened or have failed; due to a continual focus on efficiency, cost-cutting, and just-in-time production over the past forty years, there is no resiliency or extra capacity, and so when workers become sick (whether in American meat processing plants or Chinese medical supply plants), these chains break (Gioielli and Waters 2020; Reiley 2020; Salman and Fisher 2020; Mukherjee 2020; Cohen 2020). The private US healthcare system is profit-driven, so as elective surgeries and procedures have either declined or been prohibited by stay home orders, hospital systems are forced to furlough workers not directly involved in treating COVID-19 patients. Medical record systems that could be used to further knowledge of the novel coronavirus and COVID-19 are instead proprietary systems focused primarily on billing (Winant 2020; Mukherjee 2020).

Public health systems⁷ have been systematically defunded over the past forty years, while medical research funding has flowed towards trendy projects rather than basic research (Yong 2020; Gardiner 2020; Mukherjee 2020). As Liu (2020) notes,

Such dynamics expose a basic absurdity at the heart of our global society. It is not a system aimed at satisfying our desires and needs, at providing humans with greater amounts of physical utility. It is instead governed by impersonal pressures to turn goods into value, to constantly make, sell, buy, and consume commodities in an endless spiral... Given this *irrational* [emphasis added] social system of organizing wealth and value, it is no wonder that so many societies have found it impossible to contain the coronavirus by asking citizens to limit commercial activity.

Neoliberalism heavily values efficiency and claims it should be a guiding principle in society, but these failures demonstrate the irrationality of efficiency in organizing life. Siddhartha Mukherjee (2020) asks:

To what extent did the market-driven, efficiency-obsessed culture of hospital administration contribute to the crisis? Questions about “best practices” in management have become questions about best practices in public health. The numbers in the bean counter’s ledger are now body counts in a morgue.

And yet the ideological allure of neoliberalism is so powerful that we are now blaming COVID-19 victims, particularly Black people, for contracting the virus and dying (Benjamin 2020). Pandemics and other crises lay bare the irrationalities of neoliberalism; if profit is the main concern and the public good is contested, there can be no coherent, society-wide response. Disaster capitalism focused on extraction instead takes over in order to prevent activism and change: “The shock really is the virus itself. And it has been managed in a way that is maximizing confusion and minimizing protection” (Solis 2020; Klein 2007). Systems that require slack and maintenance and are not focused on profit, extraction, and exploitation, cannot exist within capitalism: “The real pandemic here is capitalism. . . It’s not a question of paying for things, it’s a question of who’s going to profit” (Núñez 2020).

Capitalism is a faith; it cannot fail, it can only be failed. It turns ideas around who and what is essential and valuable on their head, like Marx’s ([1867] 1977) table, which “stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas” (163–64). Essential workers largely turn out to be nonessential people, namely women, people of color, and poor people (Covert 2020; Ossei-Owusu 2020; Schlichte 2020). Essential workers, despite being necessary to the functioning of society by making sure that we are able to acquire food, our trash is picked up, and our packages delivered, are not valuable. As the novel coronavirus has shown, “value” is not attached to labour

7. As we have argued elsewhere (Seale and Mirza 2019), we think that the defunding of public services and goods is directly connected to racism. See also Hohle (2015).

that keeps human society functioning; it is instead seen as labour some people are naturally inclined to perform, which renders it invisible. If the people that perform the labour are perceived as disposable (Ossei-Owusu 2020), their labour will only be valuable “in the coin of ‘love’ and ‘virtue’” (Fraser 2016, 102).

After decades of austerity and being made more efficient, academic libraries likewise have little extra capacity or resiliency in their budgets or staff. The finances of academic libraries are directly connected to their host institutions, many of which rely on tuition to operate. The novel coronavirus has revealed how little slack or resiliency there is within these budgets as well. Within financialized capitalism, institutions and businesses often focus on profit in the extremely short term (as in, for example, the workings of private equity or venture capital). François Furstenberg depicts the shape of this in higher education: shared governance has disappeared, he argues, “replaced by the consolidation of administrative power in the hands of corporate executives. With little appreciation for transparency or inclusiveness, and little understanding of the academy’s mission, these managers increasingly make decisions behind closed doors and execute them from above... university leaders, like their corporate counterparts, are rewarded for their splashy acquisitions and grandiose construction projects, not for cautious stewardship” (2020). Financialized capitalism also seeks to secure future profit through financialization, or what Cédric Durand has called fictitious capital: “fictitious capital represents claims over wealth that is yet to be produced. Its expansion implies a growing pre-emption of future production” (Durand 2017, 1).⁸ For those higher education institutions with endowments,⁹ we might think of their absolute unwillingness to touch endowments as a means of securing the future, which is fundamentally *irrational* (Tennis, Brune, and Rajpurohit 2020; Knapp 2020). This is not to deny the complexities of endowments, but it is impossible to not understand this as protecting what these institutions value: the guarantee of future money - not the present lives of their employees, communities, or students.¹⁰ The striking Columbia University teaching assistants have argued that Columbia is a “wealthy institution that has wrongly partitioned its budget. Even by the logic that the university simply cannot use its endowment directly to these ends, Columbia should take advantage of its endowment to use as collateral to borrow at nearly 0 percent interest rates in order to address the

8. We do not claim to understand finance perfectly. We also think its workings are deliberately obfuscated. For more read Alexander (2017).

9. This includes several Canadian universities – University of Toronto, University of British Columbia, McGill, University of Alberta, Queens University, Dalhousie University – in addition to most American universities. See Chronicle of Higher Education Staff (2019) for more detail.

10. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Bauman 2020) is tracking furloughs and layoffs. Library furloughs and layoffs are being tracked through an anonymous Google Doc, “Tracking Library Layoffs” (2020).

needs of its workers in this crisis” (Flaherty 2020). Other Columbia employees and students have argued that “to demand that Columbia shift its budgetary priorities in the midst of a pandemic is to demand that an institution with considerable financial and cultural capital stop endorsing the notion that universities have no choice but to trim budgets by revoking funding for the academic labour that contributes most directly to its purpose as an institution of higher learning” and point out that payouts from the endowment are not determined by Polanyi’s self-regulating market, but are the product of specific decisions by specific actors (Lossin and Cook 2020). Faculty at Rutgers (2020) have analyzed the assumptions embedded in the university’s budget, which is again, not natural but the result of decisions (Rutgers University AAUP-AFT University Budget and Priorities Committee 2020). Furstenberg points out that in higher education, “instead of having an endowment to support a university, the university serves as a tax shelter for the endowment” (2020). Again, as Polanyi ([1944] 2001) observes, society is rearranged to serve as an adjunct to the economy. But future debt would compromise the future, even if it might protect people and communities in the present. Higher education is hostage to this future-oriented logic of ever-expanding capitalism even if no one and nothing can actually guarantee the future.¹¹

Conclusion: I Don’t Know How to Explain To You That You Should Care About Other People¹²

What will happen to academic libraries during and in the wake of the pandemic? We have been rationally demonstrating our value for decades, never recognizing that value is ideological and political. It is not out there in the world, a real empirical thing that we can represent with numbers and thereby prove, but always constructed. It is also always about the people who perform the work, and whether or not we consider those people valuable. Library work that is oriented towards service, emotion, care, or social reproduction is gendered; library work that is about maintenance is gendered and racialized. Value must be claimed politically and cannot be solely about the economic. The economic does not exist apart from the social.

Within capitalism, markets determine how surplus is invested, how we structure society, and what our values are, and where we put our effort is constrained by an ideology that can only ever understand financial value. Fraser (2014) argues that capital “constitutes itself as the subject of history, displacing the human beings who have made it and turning them into its servants” (59). Those institutions and people who perform the labour of social reproduction will never be able to demonstrate their value in terms that are legible to capital. If academic libraries and library workers

11. Especially given climate change.

12. This is from Chadwick (2017) but Petersen (2020a) also talks about this.

want to continue to work for the good of their communities, we must use different language. Fraser (2014) provides examples:

some opponents of neoliberalism draw on ideals of care, solidarity and mutual responsibility, associated with reproduction, in order to oppose efforts to commodify education. Others summon notions of stewardship of nature and justice between generations, associated with ecology, to militate for a shift to renewable energy. Still others invoke ideals of public autonomy, associated with polity, to advocate international capital controls and to extend democratic accountability beyond the state. (68)

Although specific recommendations for reframing our work are beyond the scope of this essay, we might suggest that we begin by following Fraser. Academic library workers might begin to understand and describe library services and collections in terms of care and mutual responsibility to those individuals and communities within and around the academic library; academic library workers might also work to develop solidarity among workers within their institutions, across and despite traditional hierarchies.

Rebecca Solnit (2020) proposes that disasters serve as inflection points for change, if we understand what becomes possible and what we can now do:

A disaster (which originally meant “ill-starred”, or “under a bad star”) changes the world and our view of it. Our focus shifts, and what matters shifts. What is weak breaks under new pressure, what is strong holds, and what was hidden emerges. Change is not only possible, we are swept away by it.

Arundhati Roy (2020) similarly suggests,

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

The pandemic, specifically, Solnit (2020) suggests, calls attention to “the privatisation of the human heart, the withdrawal from a sense of a shared fate and social bonds” that characterize neoliberalism, and that we have described here. It has brought “the engine of capitalism to a juddering halt” (Roy 2020). We have seen changes that reflect this contestation of neoliberalism such as the development of mutual aid networks (Tolentino 2020), the public health measures developed and carried out not by the Hong Kong government, but by its citizens (Tufekci 2020), in calls for a New Deal for Public Health (Gonsalves and Kapczynski 2020), and in the social solidarity and community-focused acts of staying home and masking in public.

In the world of libraries, we have seen solidarity in librarians organizing on Twitter: the creation of petitions to close libraries, the drafting of language and templates around library closures, the lobbying of local, regional, and national library associations to endorse closing, the use of social media peer pressure to close libraries, the tracking of open libraries initially and then the tracking of library furloughs and layoffs, and throughout, the support and empathy for other library workers. This work largely happened outside of professional library organizations, higher education institutions, and the local governments that fund public libraries; in many cases, these were the institutions, ideologically captured by the irrationality of neoliberal capitalism, which had to be resisted and pressured into protecting lives. We will likely be living and working within capitalism for the foreseeable future, but we can reframe how we think about, talk about, and materially support the care work and social reproduction performed by library workers. We can work to remove the expectation of altruism and vocational awe from this work (Mattern 2018; Ettarh 2018). Our reluctance to think about our institutions and our work in political terms does not render them apolitical. Rather, as Blanke (1989) points out, claiming neutrality ends in acquiescence to dominant and oppressive ideologies, some of which directly contribute to the defunding of public goods such as libraries. Sara Ahmed (2018) has suggested that “collectivity can be acquired as direction; the more a path is traveled upon the clearer it becomes,” and these examples of library workers engaging in political action and supporting each other have helped clarify that path. Academic libraries and library work can become a site of boundary struggle between neoliberalism and our own efforts to critique value and capital while centring employees, patrons, and communities. They can become sites of mutual aid, harm reduction, and nuance; we can seek out alternative understandings of value that better reflect our work.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Maura Seale is the History Librarian at the University of Michigan. She edited, with Karen P. Nicholson, *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship*, which was published by Library Juice Press in March 2018. She has also written about critical librarianship, library pedagogy and information literacy, race and gender in librarianship, and the political economy of libraries. She welcomes comments [@mauraseale](#) on Twitter.

Rafia Mirza is a Humanities Librarian at Southern Methodist University. She writes about Digital Humanities, project planning, and race, gender, and labor in librarianship. Her writing has been published in a number of outlets, including *Library Trends*, *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, and *College & Undergraduate Libraries*. She can be found at [@LibrarianRafia](#) on Twitter.

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